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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000622

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, McDERMOTT
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA
STATE PASS USAID FOR LAUDATO/NANDY/SCOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/04/2014

TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PINR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14: "CHRISTIAN MOMENTUM MOVING TO US"

REF: DAMASCUS 377

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A group of March 14 candidates gathered at lunch a few days before the June 7 vote told us securing the majority of the Christian vote -- keeping opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun from getting it -- remains the key to March 14 victory in the elections. They complained that the Supervisory Commission on the Electoral Campaign (SCEC) enforcing new election laws on the media is showing a bias against March 14 candidates. Despite their complaints, they were confident March 14 would win the majority in the June 7 vote. They also assessed Vice President Biden's May 22 trip as positive because it underscored the U.S. support for March 14. End Summary.

"MUST WIN CHRISTIAN VOTERS"

¶2. (C) The DCM, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief and PolOff, hosted a luncheon at his residence on June 1 for three March 14 MP candidates: Fares Souaid, Jawad Boulos and Serge Torsarkessian, plus two March 14 advisors, Nader Hariri and Nadim Qoteich. The group was confident about March 14's chances of winning the June 7 parliamentary elections and stressed that it was still the case that Christian districts will be decisive. Boulos, an incumbent from the heavily Maronite Zgharta district, claimed a transformation was taking place among Christian voters in favor of March 14. Almost 10,000 people showed up at a recent rally for him and his allies in their district, he said, while in the 2005 elections, they struggled to get even 2,000 people. Fares Souaid agreed that there appears to be an increase in March 14 support among Christian voters, but stressed that more work needs to be done.

¶3. (C) Asked about Vice President Biden's May 22 trip to Lebanon, Hariri judged it useful because it signaled to the undecided Christians that the United States remains committed to March 14, and that March 14 must win the elections for Lebanon to keep the United States as a friend.

ENFORCEMENT OF ELECTORAL LAW BIASED

¶4. (C) The group complained that members of the Supervisory Commission on the Electoral Campaign (SCEC) are biased against March 14 when it comes to monitoring media outlets for conformance to new electoral laws. According to Hariri, the SCEC, whose responsibility is to ensure compliance with regulations on campaign spending and coverage by media outlets, is focusing more on March 14 news outlets, such as Future TV, than on March 8-aligned media outlets, such as OTV. (Note: The SCEC data on media law transgression is not yet available; we will make our assessment of this issue when the information is released. End Note.)

SECURITY AND SYRIA REMAIN CONCERNS

¶5. (C) All agreed that the organization and response of the security forces to violence was key to insuring voter security. Boulos said that the time it took for security forces to respond to the skirmishes at the recent rally in Zgharta was disappointing. Although the incidents were minor, Boulos explained that the general in charge of the deployment had to report back to the commander in chief before authorizing any action. "If this happens on elections day, this will be a problem," he lamented.

¶6. (C) Qoteich said that Syria is still a concern to March 14, despite Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's declaration that Syria will not interfere in the elections (reftel). Qoteich explained that there are two phases in the elections,

a "voting" phase and a "counting the ballots" phase, and that there is no assurance that Syria will not interfere during the second phase. Qoteich said that if one polling station is destroyed while ballots are being counted, the whole voting process will be obstructed.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Despite claims that the cards are stacked against March 14, the lunch guests still expressed confidence in a March 14 victory, echoing what Saad Hariri and other March 14 leaders have been telling us for months. End Comment.

SISON